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AUTHOR Walker, Gary
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ABSTRACT

The general reluctance to use public policy to confront social concerns has increased over the past 20 years. This document discusses how America arrived at this view of public social policy. Mentoring and after-school programs are examined to help explain specific opportunities and limits likely to make up the social policy climate for early adolescents. Optimal strategies to enhance the policy climate should include five basic elements: (1) ensure new local and state initiatives promote national opportunities; (2) use simple and clear language to explain initiatives; (3) produce evidence that initiatives make a difference in relation to priority issues; (4) develop brand-name institutions; and (5) articulate roles for each sector that people judge should be responsible for a youth's development. The lack of confidence in public social policy as an effective means to solve critical issues is too powerful for moral arguments to overcome. The essay concludes that the critical complements to advocacy and communication are seizing opportunities that exist at the national level and building on them at all levels. (JDM)

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The Policy Climate for Early Adolescent Initiatives

Gary Walker

January 2001

While writing this essay on the "policy climate" for improving the lives and prospects of young teens, I asked random contacts—cab drivers, people sitting next to me on trains and planes, bored conference colleagues, a woman on a particularly slow and long elevator ride—what struck them when they thought about young teens in today's world. Their responses without exception expressed worry and concern; so I asked what they thought should be done and who should do it.

Over six months I talked in some depth to 26 different people from all walks of life. An unscientific survey, I admit, but the conversations were always fascinating, always went on longer than I expected (elevator interview excepted), and were remarkably consistent on five themes.

First, once they had gotten past some early griping and statements of "not understanding them," it was not hard for most to sympathize with the dilemmas of being a young teen. No matter their age, they could remember their own lives during those years as full of confusion and uncertainty. Some shook their heads in disbelief and appreciation that they had made it through adolescence at all.

Second, most thought that today's youth had it harder than they had. *None wanted to be young now.* They cited the availability of weapons and drugs, the media's demoralizing impact, the need for more education to "make it," the fast pace of change in today's world and how difficult that made it to maintain "traditional values" (no matter the age, race, ethnicity, apparent income or social class, they all felt the erosion of values). One woman cab driver said it succinctly: "Oh, we were poorer, but these are the days of *mental* hardship for kids."

Third, they mostly blamed parents, the public schools and the media for those teens who could not meet current challenges. No matter how difficult the challenge, they felt these basic institutions had the responsibility to support and guide youth.

Fourth, they had few specific positive ideas on what to do. They were stumped by how to make parents do better; mostly stumped by how to improve the schools (with a few saying the schools needed more competition); and mostly stumped by how to control the media (with a few advocating strong censorship). But, when pressed, they usually turned back to parents—and beyond that, to fatalism. As one said, "You're talking about teens. This is the period they make the right choices or don't, and there's no way to guarantee they'll make the right ones." A few said maybe more Boys & Girls Clubs would help. Several thought churches should get more involved.

Fifth, they had very little to no confidence that public policy had any solutions. Most just shook their heads and said they could not imagine what the public sector might do, except improve the schools—and their confidence in that was not high. A few said the law needed to be clearer about the consequences of wrong decisions.

You might think that this uncertainty over what to do arises because the people I talked to do not specialize in the issue of what to do; they are not "youth experts." And, no doubt, most issues benefit from reflection and evidence. On the other hand, this is not an arcane problem. Most of these people are parents; all had been youth. Many had lived through, or had close acquaintance with, difficult young teen lives.

The lengthy discussions I had with several people in my random sample led me to conclude that the reason for the confusion is deeper and more diverse than a lack of specialization. It has to do, I think, with the complex, transitional and inconclusive nature of the early teen years themselves; with a conviction that the basic institutions that are responsible for or influence youth are failing; with a belief that there are no good alternatives; and with an American political and social culture that is instinctively distrustful of public solutions to problems of individual and family behavior.

In short, the underlying reasons for the lack of solutions are grounded in some hard realities that even the most specialized knowledge does not resolve and at best can only confront.

Since the "policy climate" for an issue as fundamental as improving the lives and prospects of young teens is, in a democracy, rooted largely in the opinions and common sense of ordinary citizens, I take the concerns and opinions expressed by this random group of strangers seriously. They were without exception a thoughtful group of people, none of whom expressed hostility to or seemed uncaring about teens. If this sample was skewed, it was toward tolerance to young teens. But other than that, they left an impression similar to the one I get when looking at polls and newspaper articles: concerned and baffled about what to do.

This essay examines and builds on the gleanings from my informal survey and tries to sketch out the opportunities and limits—the "policy climate"—that seem to characterize America in the early years of the 21st century. Though the common concern of citizens for young teens can be seen as suggesting a receptive climate for improved policies, their sense of frustration at the performance of such basic institutions as families and schools, their frustration at not being able to intuit or articulate what might be done to counter that frustration, and their lack of confidence in public policy as being capable of finding solutions do not make for a truly receptive climate. And even the most perfect solution, if there were such a creature, needs to be recognized and believed in, in order to be adopted as durable policy.

America's View of Public Social Policy

No one would claim that American political culture embraces public social policy as a tool of first resort for improving social conditions or solving social problems. Quite the contrary: we generally view it as a tool of last resort, when private solutions clearly do not work and when the condition or problem is serious and highly visible. The major public social policy initiatives of the 1930s required a national depression to gain support; those of the 1960s and 1970s required riots.

This reluctance to use social policy is our historical political culture, and rarely has it been more evident than in the last decade. In that broad sense, it is incontrovertible that the "policy climate" is not favorable to wide-scale public efforts to improve the lives and conditions of adolescents.

Further, even when we do resort to public social policy, we are not patient with it: we want to see progress, and we want to see it quickly. If we suspect social policy is not solving problems—or is perhaps creating other problems—we abandon or significantly reduce our public initiatives. The major initiatives of the War on Poverty, and our policies regarding youth employment, are recent examples.

The general reluctance to use public policy to confront social concerns has hardened over the past 20 years. The most vocal advocates for public social policy claim this abandonment is a national moral failure, rooted in our country's extreme individualism and social Darwinism. There is an undeniable but only partial truth to that claim. For many people, including most of those I spoke with, the bigger and more practical reason for this hardening is the perception that social policies are ineffective—that they fail. This perception is not confined to one party or political stripe. An enthusiastic supporter of public social policy, Democrat and former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich did not advocate for continuation of the relatively large several billion dollars youth title of the Job Training Partnership Act because, he said, the evidence was clear: employment training programs for youth do not work.

Secretary Reich's view is perfectly reflected in an "ordinary citizen's" letter to the editor in the Sunday *Philadelphia Inquirer* of May 3, 1999:

> *Personally I don't think that the average taxpaying, law-abiding citizen is numbed to the atrocities that occur daily. I just think we don't know what to do about them. What's the answer? I have no idea.*

Changing that perception is not solely a matter of improved communication and more ethical politics, difficult as those are to achieve. A substantial body of evidence supports that discouraging conclusion. It is not entirely the work of morality and communication that two major social programs with strong survival records—Head Start and Job Corps—both have evidence that they work and a positive image among political leaders and the public alike.

Critics maintain that the evidence is selective because better programs were not evaluated; the evaluation methods were too rigid; the implementation periods were not long enough; and that there are more promising approaches to try. I think each of those arguments has merit, but they are too fine-tuned to overcome the widespread perception that is now in place. It will take counter-evidence, and a significant body of

it, to dent the evidentiary crust that has formed over our country's general reluctance to use public social policy in matters of social behavior.

The "outcomes movement" that has developed among many policy-influential individuals and institutions is a major effort to confront the perception of failure. Most public social legislation now requires strong evaluation components; many philanthropic initiatives do as well. This is, of course, an opportunity to create counter-evidence, but it is also a risk: unless these new initiatives are a substantive improvement over those previously evaluated, these future evaluations are likely to produce more skepticism (Walker and Grossman, 1999).

The strong performance of the American economy these past 10 years, the relative decline of the Pacific Rim economies and the collapse of Soviet communism all strengthen the notion that the public sector is not the way to solve problems: let the private sector do it. The privatization of many social functions and the heightened emphasis on "civil society" to address critical issues *a la* 1997's President's Summit on youth issues are the outgrowths of all these converging forces. They simply reflect the public's low opinion, shown in poll after poll, of the public sector as a solution to problems of social behavior.

I have painted a negative picture of the overall view of public social policy, historically and currently, not because I think it is always fair or always works out well, but because it just *is*—a deep current in American life, part of its character, with strengths and weaknesses, not necessarily or always mean-spirited and, more important, not simply a short-term trend. It is an independent force to be reckoned with as we consider the prospects for improved public social policy with regard to early adolescents, one deeply intertwined with America's great successes as well as its shortcomings.

The Nature of the Issue

The *general* social policy climate in the United States is, thus, difficult and resistant. But the climate for a *particular* social policy initiative can be less resistant depending on a number of factors.

My reading of the past 30 years is that three factors are especially important:

- The immediate moral power of the issue, i.e., its capacity to push the "fairness" button in American leaders and the broader electorate, based on recent events;
- The resolve, resources and political-communications strategies of its key advocates; and
- The clarity and urgency of the solution.

I do not mean by this to reduce American politics to a rational and predictable framework of rules and conditions; that would ignore both the ambiguities and downright contradictions inherent in any complex array of human relationships and behavior and would underrate what a powerful individual on a mission can accomplish. Nonetheless, our political behavior does have its general characteristics and patterns—a framework you can most often count on to hold. I think the above three factors are generally useful and reliable components of a strategy to put a major piece of social policy in place.

The first two factors have to do with getting an audience for the issue, to have it considered as an exception to the country's general resistance to social policy. The various civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s are the most obvious examples.

The third factor has to do with the formulation and implementation of the solution: is it comprehensible, compelling and intuitively doable? It is difficult to get sustained and widespread support for a policy initiative that does not have those features. The solution does not have to be *easy* to do—desegregating the schools and enforcing fairness in public accommodations and in employment have been anything but easy. It just needs to be understandable.

The group of people I talked with are all concerned about young teens—they all had sympathy for the challenges teens face in growing up. Compared with the respondents to surveys like that done in 1997 by Public Agenda, my interviewees are more sympathetic to teens than is the voting public at large. But along with their sympathy, I did not sense either moral outrage or the sense that the public at large *has* to do something. Nor did they convey much sense that unfairness is at the root of the problem. Rather they see the problems of young teens as being in part intrinsic to being a young teen and in part caused by social forces well beyond the reach of social policies and programs. They are sorry that the world has become so challenging and sorry that early adolescence is such a difficult time in human life. They do not see a way to change either.

Part of the reason for their attitude has to do with the fact that there is no long-standing, sustained and powerful national advocacy movement for young teens; the voters are not roused, but rather sorry and puzzled. And certainly there have been, over the past few years, an increasing number of articles and editorials saying that Americans have lost their capacity to be morally out-

raged. To whatever degree that is true, it would combine with the lack of a powerful advocacy movement to produce a potent lassitude.

But part of the reason that there is no powerful and sustained advocacy movement is the very nature of the early teen years as perceived by most adults and as reflected in my interviews. Adults see adolescence as a confusing and trying time, full of new thinking, experimentation and hormonal change, ups and downs in mood—hard to characterize easily, hard to predict, hard to explain in terms of cause and effect. The people I talked to were not hostile to the state of adolescence; they just did not think that much could be done about it, unless it is by parents or schools. In the end, to them, adolescence is something to "get through"—so internally driven as to be impervious to outside influence.

Another reason it is difficult to mount and sustain a campaign for adolescents is that the information available about early teens supports divergent views. On the one hand, we hear that young teens are very dangerous to themselves and others, are having babies irresponsibly, are using drugs, and are performing poorly in school—are, in short, a disaster. The media coverage of prom abortions and the recent string of school shootings by so-called "ordinary kids" adds to the impression that all teens are at risk of such behavior. And, indeed, some very respected youth advocates and experts say precisely that: that all youth are at risk. This would seem to be the basis for a movement to increase the public's receptiveness to policy aimed at adolescents (though what its content would be is a separate issue).

But there is an opposing point of view, which stresses that in fact most teens are not so different now than they were decades ago and that things are better in some respects. The *New York Times* recently carried two major stories in a three-day period about teenagers, one headlined "Birth Rates for Teenagers Declined Sharply in the 1990s," which reported that from 1991 to 1996, for the first time "in decades and decades," birth rates dropped, as did sexual activity, while contraception increased. Both liberals and conservatives took credit.

The other story outlined a number of adult myths about teenagers:

- Myth No. 1: Youth are becoming more violent and criminally dangerous.

  "Wrong," says the article, and presents compelling evidence that adults are the real threat and that youth violence is neither on the rise nor happens very often.

- Myth No. 4: Drugs remain a threat to young people.

  "Wrong," says the article...the evidence is that adults are the problem. Youth drug use dropped in the 1970s and has remained low ever since.

- Myth No. 5: Teenagers are naturally rebellious and impulsive risk-takers.

  Wrong again. The article says they largely reflect their parents.

These differing views do not coalesce into a powerful image on which to build public policy. You can take a middle course and say that we should not be reassured by recently encouraging trends, that the early teens are fragile years, that these are indeed times of "mental hardship" for teenagers, and demand a public response. But that brings us to the third factor: clarity of solution. What is it we are proposing to do and to what end? And that is hard to say without some rough consensus on what the problem is.

The more problem oriented the goal is, the easier it is to be clear about what to do. And that is in fact what we have been doing for the past 25 years: defining a problem (teen pregnancy, drug abuse, poor school performance) and then proposing a concrete program to solve it. That approach can meet the three conditions laid out above and often has.

But it is precisely that approach that continues to produce such weak results. Evaluation after evaluation has concluded that the program it examined did not have much enduring effect on teens' lives. In the summer of 1997, a conference was held in Chicago solely to discuss three recent evaluations of major public programs designed to address one or more of the above-mentioned adolescent problems—and the fact that none showed any significant effectiveness.

This has led to the widely held view among youth professionals and experts that deficiency-oriented programming is the culprit and that a more positive, youth development approach must be devised. This approach promotes a broader view of youth than the problem-oriented approach might imply and focuses on youth's assets and potentials. It is about successful development as opposed to problem solution.

The difficulty with youth development vis-à-vis the three conditions laid out above is that it is not clear what it means in policy or in operation—it is hard to visualize—and is thus hard to rally around. It also does not strike a "fairness" chord, especially when it is accompanied by the claim (as it often is) that *all* youth are at risk. That claim strikes many people, and influential ones at that (remember the *New York Times* articles above), as excessive. It also brings disagreement: large numbers of people think youth need more and firmer discipline, which is not what the phrase "positive youth development" brings to mind.

However, there is some evidence that recognizable pieces of the youth development approach work. For example, everyone would agree that a caring adult is a critical element of youth development, and Public/Private Ventures' 1995 impact evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters offers clear evidence that a caring adult can be provided in a social intervention and can have substantial impacts on first drug use and school performance and behavior—not by focusing on problems, but by promoting friendship and trust between an adult and youth who were previously strangers.

Evaluations of Boys & Girls Clubs have also produced compelling evidence about their effects on negative behaviors, and Girls Incorporated and YMCAs have generated operational evidence about their usefulness to youth development. This evidence has been fairly widely disseminated and has helped sustain interest in two particular aspects of youth development that have been the focus of strong national advocacy and media attention: mentoring and after-school programming.

Mentoring has in fact been a subject of favorable attention for almost a decade now. The 1997 President's Summit made it the first of its five-part agenda and is being promoted by Retired General Colin Powell and his America's Promise organization. It has the support of a number of foundations; of the brand-name Big Brothers Big Sisters; and of an increasing number of influential leaders in politics, business and public agencies.

The after-school issue (what do children do with that time?) has begun to receive more and more attention. It is also one of Powell's agenda items and has been well-promoted as a social policy topic by both the Carnegie Corporation and the strong advocacy of Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League. In mid-April of 1998, *Newsweek* carried the issue on its cover and detailed it in a strong article.

So there are two specific initiatives for younger teens that are alive and well in the policy world. They both have the potential to meet all three of the conditions for policy advance that I noted above. Congress has already approved a major after-school initiative in which the Mott Foundation is participating. Two other influential foundations—DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and George Soros' Open Society Institute—are investing millions in after-school programming. Congress just gave $20 million to Boys & Girls Clubs of America. The Department of Justice has a multimillion dollar mentoring initiative. A number of cities and a number of philanthropies

are mounting large initiatives to provide these and other supports and opportunities for young teens.

This is good news for policy advocates for adolescents, particularly those who espouse a youth development approach. It means that in spite of the generally cautious climate for social policy in America, and in spite of the ambiguous nature of adolescence and the evidence about its current condition, there are some policy actions with enough clarity and urgency to have made it to the arena of real policy discussion. So there is a receptive climate…*but* how receptive? Our judgment on that is important, for it will shape our future actions and strategies.

Opportunities and Limits

To better understand the specific opportunities and limits likely to make up the social policy climate for early adolescent initiatives, it is helpful to examine mentoring and after-school programming in more depth. Besides meeting the three conditions laid out earlier, they have several other instructive commonalities.

The Commonalities of Mentoring and After-School Programming

First, the two concepts are very basic. There is nothing more basic than a young person's need for a caring adult, and that, I think, is the most powerful reason for mentoring's continued popularity. After-school activities are also basic; like mentoring, they are easy to visualize and are doable. Most adults remember doing them in their youth—much as they remember having caring adults–and it does strike their sense of fairness that today's youth do not have these basic supports.

Second, they are identified with "brand names" in which people have confidence: Big Brothers Big Sisters *is* mentoring in the public's eye, and Boys & Girls Clubs and Little Leagues are well known and highly regarded for their after-school activities.

Does this mean that brand names are the only way social policy can accomplish mentoring and after-school activities? Not necessarily. The brand name simply casts a favorable light on the effectiveness of a generic activity. But it does seem obvious that the closer the identification the proposed policies have with these brand names, the stronger their chances of being adopted. The problem with the claim "we know what to do for youth, it's only lack of political will that prevents us from doing it" is that clearly we too often do not know *how* to do it. It is one thing to say that it is obvious youth need caring adults; it is quite another to say we know how to create deliberately through policy those caring adults. Brand names are the Good Housekeeping Seal of Doability.

Third, neither model is primarily or dominantly associated with national public policy or with public institutions. Mentoring has almost no association with public policy, and though many after-school activities are indeed school-operated, many are not. The very words "after school" free the phrase from institutional capture; most of us think as such of volunteer adults coaching athletic leagues, or of Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, or 4-H. In an age of particularly low confidence in public policy, this private association is particularly useful.

Fourth, the strength of mentoring and after-school programming is associated to a considerable degree with their capacity to reduce negative behavior. That is, as much as mentoring and positive after-school activities are seen as elementary and basic to growing up, their power to shape public policy is still tied not to their potential for *promoting* positive youth development but to their potential for *reducing* negative behavior. The largest amounts of public funds at the federal level going specifically to mentoring are located in the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention. The interest in after-school programming for early adolescents as a public policy initiative is firmly tied to the widespread perception, based on strong advocacy and communication efforts, that those are the hours when a high proportion of teenage sex and crime occurs.

The Implications for Policy

So what do these four commonalities mean for the policy climate when added to the three conditions (fairness button, strong advocacy and clear solution) noted earlier? The most obvious overall implication is one of tight limits. Barring the sort of unusual occurrence and extraordinary leadership that can upset all ordinary rules, I think that the opportunities in the foreseeable future for new and major public policy initiatives aimed at early adolescents are very limited, especially at the national level.

I also suspect that at the national level such unusual occurrences as the string of shootings in early 1998 and 1999 are less likely to lead to major "developmental" initiatives than to a mix of measures that are mostly punitive (harsher sentences, treatment as adults) and restrictive (restricted access to guns, driving licenses and adult media). The latter will be harder to implement since adult financial interests are involved.

Tight as the restrictions are, they do not deny any opportunity for action at the national level: they simply define a narrow avenue for successful strategy. That avenue requires that we view public interest in activities like mentoring and after-school programming not as narrow, modest items that are too limited and oriented to negative behavior to warrant an all-out effort, but as good-as-they-come opportunities to gain public support for the very basic developmental supports that all youth need. The nonprofit and philanthropic organizations that believe American society is shortchanging its youth could have great impact if they organized around these opportunities to ensure that they develop roots in policy and implementation, and that they in fact, backed by credible evidence, reduce the negative behaviors Americans want their social policy to affect.

There are alternatives to getting behind these modest and narrow opportunities and pushing them. One is to put efforts and resources behind leaders and strategies aimed at changing our country's attitudes toward adolescents *and* toward the use of public policy.

My read, much as I dislike it, is that either one of those changes is a long shot, and both together come close to impossibility. There may be small victories in both regards accomplished by exceptional individuals, but I do not believe they will form the basis for large-scale changes in attitudes toward teens and public policy, mostly because American attitudes toward those two topics have as much truth and merit as they do misperception and dysfunction. They are neither mostly wrong nor mostly immoral.

Another alternative is to forget national policy and concentrate on states, localities and the private sector. This is the age of devolution—exploit it.

This alternative is persuasive not only because of devolution but because the local level is where many of the adults, resources and decisions that influence youth are located—and where all these influences manifest themselves concretely. In addition, given the previous difficulty in convincing the public that social interventions for early adolescents are effective, issues of local design, implementation and evaluation require increased attention. The voting public will most likely need some form of concrete proof that an approach works before it will even consider it nationally.

The local-state option has so much merit that its greatest downside is that it will win too much of the available energy and resources. Pride in idiosyncrasy, accompanied by the fact-insensitive local boosterism that so marks American history, might make for bursts of local activity and communication, some of which might be very successful. But if they do not satisfy the three conditions noted earlier, they are probably not good candidates for national policy embrace.

"So what?" you might ask. Let us focus on spreading things that work through state and local channels, avoiding the national level to the maximum extent possible. This strategy is appealing in two ways: first, there is a substantive need for greater work in the area of local-to-local and state-to-state policy communication and adaptation; and second, it is a wonderfully resourceful reaction to constrictive national opportunities.

However, we would be shortsighted to ignore the national level. That level is, in the end, where significant and equity-producing resources reside. It is important to remember that devolution itself requires the distribution of federal resources and that their continued distribution as well as their growth will ultimately depend on a national sense that these resources are used effectively. The history of devolution funding over the past three decades does not offer any confidence that such funding will persist solely on the grounds of its philosophy; it will be examined, and if found lacking, it will be reduced or discontinued. It may not be replaced by a significant national initiative without convincing evidence that some local initiatives are effective.

The federal government is also the only possible guarantor of any real equity in the application of effective policies. A solely local-state strategy, no matter how successful, will finally meet the wall of unequal resource capacity.

So what does all this amount to? Is there any optimal strategy that would be most likely to take advantage of the "policy climate" I have described—a climate that is narrow at the national level, more wide open at the state and local levels, and yet connected by the need for federal resources?

The Elements of a Strategy

It would be foolhardy to assert any one optimal strategy that can promise the greatest policy benefit to young adolescents. But as I think back on the people I interviewed, the outlines of a broad strategy do emerge. It contains five basic elements:

1. *Ensure that new local and state initiatives promote national opportunities.* At first blush, this might sound unnecessarily limiting; what is the point of local experimentation if it must conform to national constraints? The point here is that local experimentation should aggressively tie itself to national opportunities—for it is the perceived success or failure of those opportunities that will have a great deal to do with national attitudes about the usefulness of public social policy. It will do little good over the long run to act as if the public will is a blank slate that can be created anew "when the time is right."

   In fact, the public will is constantly being created; the time is always now. The current openness to mentoring and after-school programming may be limited opportunities, but they are opportunities nonetheless. Their success or failure in the new round of state and local initiatives will play a significant role in our country's willingness to consider other policies that may be useful to early adolescents.

   This is easier said than done. The desire for innovation in local and state government, and in the world of philanthropy, almost amounts to a cult. That desire, combined with the call by many youth advocates for policies that are more "comprehensive, integrated, holistic and sequential," conspire to discount or ignore these apparently limited opportunities.

   I think this is a serious mistake. These opportunities are not only politically important; they are substantively capable of creative adaptation to more complex

ideas. They are the building blocks for improved policies, and an improved policy climate.

2. *Use simple and clear language to explain initiatives.* This seems obvious as a matter of all communication, and especially so in a policy climate that is narrow and distrustful. I think of the letter to the editor quoted earlier, where the writer said she did not believe most people were numb to the problems of the world—they just did not know what to do about them. She will need to be convinced that there are things that can be done, in language she can understand.

The youth field has on the whole taken a different tack. It emphasizes the complexity of the problems youth face and how correspondingly complex the solutions must be. The language of "comprehensive, integrated, holistic and sequential" may serve as broad guideposts for those designing initiatives, but it will never serve to improve the policy climate. Unlike science and medicine, youth policy is not an area of human activity where jargon creates respect and trust. The jargon barrier only creates distance from the possibility of durable policy and substantial resources.

We have to be able to say in ordinary language what it is we are proposing to do. This will conflict with the youth field's desire for professionalism, but clarity must take precedence over that desire if the goal is an improved policy climate.

I think it will also improve local implementation, which bears on the next point.

3. *Produce evidence that initiatives make a difference in relation to priority issues.* The distinctions between *preventive* and *reclamation*, between *deficiency* and *developmental*, are not without meaning, but they are mostly debates internal to the small world of aficionados who spend their lives thinking about youth policy and programs. They are largely irrelevant to the forces and considerations that make up the public policy climate, which are primarily concerned with the solution to priority issues.

Those priority issues are not hard to name; they have to do with adolescent crime, drugs, pregnancy, school performance and preparation for employment. I think it is very unlikely that we can create a durable and improved policy climate for early adolescent initiatives unless we can show that our initiatives effectively address those issues.

From that perspective, the debates noted above are in a sense diverting us from larger truths: we need more and improved preventive policies *and* reclamation policies, for there will always be youth who need each. And we need to address deficiencies in ways that are effective—that are developmentally appropriate and yet sensitive to considerations of community safety and order—which means that punishment and discipline, as well as supports and opportunities, must be possible in our policy initiatives. All these options are necessary for a policy climate that is responsive to the variety of actual human needs; each one must have evidence that it makes a difference relative to these priority issues if it is to generate and maintain significant public support.

That evidence does not, especially for younger adolescents, need to show that the issue is totally resolved. Our social quest is for resolution; our immediate policy climate quest is for progress. Thus, P/PV's impact evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters does not show that a mentor in the early adolescent years forecloses future problems in the youth's life. It does show that it, at a minimum, forestalls them for 18 months. This sort of "forestalling evidence" is not only important for policy purposes; it will also assist us in our implementation of "comprehensive, holistic, integrated and sequential" programming. The latter, of course, will still be composed of

discontinuous and discrete parts. That is the nature of external interventions in any human life. Credible knowledge of their distinct contribution to achieving progress on the priority issues is critical to policy and practice.

4. *Use and develop brand-name institutions.* The marketability of policies and ideas is greatly enhanced if known and respected organizations are living examples of those policies and ideas. There are a number of such institutions in the early adolescent area: Boys & Girls Clubs and Big Brothers Big Sisters are obvious examples. We should ensure their soundness, their spread in fact and in influence, and their use as standards for all like activities.

   This is a hard message to disseminate in a social policy world with a general culture of innovation, funding sources that pursue innovation separately, the natural forces of local idiosyncrasy and a historical moment that rhetorically favors the particular over the national. Nonetheless, I think its value to creating a more open social policy climate is critical: they are the only trusted brand names we have to work with. They need not be the owners of all policy initiatives or their operation; they should be involved, used and strengthened to the maximum extent possible.

5. *Articulate roles for each sector (public, private and nonprofit) and for each primary institution that most people judge should be responsible for a youth's development (family, school and church).* Collaboration is a popular word, and thus the involvement of multiple sectors would appear to need little emphasis. So I will not repeat the substantive arguments that support it. But there are several aspects to the word "collaboration"; in my judgment the one that is most talked about is overemphasized, while the most critical aspects receive much less attention than they deserve.

   The aspect that receives the most attention is the process and goal of working together. That aspect of collaboration sounds (and is) both high-minded and difficult. It implies ongoing process and consensus. Issues of class, belief, culture, negotiating, style, and so on, all are important.

   To focus on the "working together" aspect of collaboration, however, overemphasizes its most difficult aspect, and sometimes exacerbates it. As a rallying cry, it is substantively empty, and it tends to draw skepticism from those with practical operational experience in any sector.

   The aspect of collaboration that counters "working together's" orientation toward complexity and process is "role definition." The concreteness of defining sectoral roles and responsibilities not only helps ensure that the initiative has beef; it also helps ensure that the comparative advantages of each sector are used and not ignored or blurred by the goal or process of working together. Working collaboratively can thus mean mostly working apart, each sector doing what it does best. That is generally the best way for people from different sectors to accomplish common goals.

   The second aspect of collaboration that deserves more attention is political—the sense most people have (including my interviewees) that family, school and religion are primarily responsible for the behavior of youth. Other forces *influence* youth, but those three institutions are *responsible*.

   The accuracy of this judgment can be debated endlessly. The important point is that to develop policy initiatives without addressing the role of those primary institutions is to invite criticism from any number of seemingly incompatible political forces. It is also to ignore what are in fact elements critical to substantive effectiveness.

Addressing the role of these primary institutions does not always mean defining a role; sometimes an actual role for each primary institution will just not be viable or sensible. But it is important to communicate that their importance has been acknowledged and considered, and if no role is envisioned, the reasoning behind that decision. This will not satisfy all critics, but it will convince some who otherwise would have a knee-jerk reaction to any less-than-dominant role for primary institutions.

Closing Thoughts

There is no question that our political culture does not tend toward excess when it comes to devising social policies and spending taxpayer money on adolescents—especially on adolescents in poor communities. A more generous attitude, one that tolerates the errors of excess, would no doubt provide stability, direction and opportunity to many more young people than currently have them.

Some will argue that changing that political culture is the first order of business and that it must be done directly, through advocacy and communication. I too believe that advocacy and communication are vital, but I am skeptical that moral argument alone will change our culture. The lack of confidence in public social policy as an effective means to solve critical issues is too powerful for moral arguments to overcome, except for occasional small victories. Guilt over inaction is significantly blunted by a reasonable disbelief in the effectiveness of action.

The critical complements to advocacy and communication are seizing the modest and concrete opportunities that do exist at the national level and building on them at all levels. To do so requires an understanding and acceptance of limits on the social policy climate that are not always uplifting but that do form the pathway to building a more positive social policy climate. Clarity, evidence, brand names, sectoral roles, primary institutions—using these factors to exploit national opportunities is in my judgment the most effective way to transcend the rather chilly climate that exists for early adolescent initiatives.

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives, especially as they affect youth and young adults. In carrying out this mission, P/PV works with philanthropies, the public and business sectors, and nonprofit organizations.

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Public/Private Ventures

One Commerce Square
2005 Market Street, Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Tel: 215-557-4400
Fax: 215-557-4469
Url: http://www.ppv.org